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By HR-m/SG Date 8/22/91

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*W. H. H. H.*

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*Personal*

April 13, 1959

Dear Coburn:

I am indeed grateful to you for your thoughtful letter of April 3 regarding a "credible" military posture in connection with the Berlin situation. I was especially interested in your last paragraph on page 4. Certainly if we allow ourselves to become hitched to the lowest common denominator of British fears of ultimate annihilation on the Berlin issue or any other major issue provoked by the Soviet Union, our chances for successful negotiation are greatly diminished. Thank you for keeping me informed of your thinking.

I hope you are thriving and with warm regards to you both, believe me

Sincerely yours,

Robert Murphy

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Coburn Kidd, Esquire,  
American Embassy,  
London.

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THE FOREIGN SERVICE  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

American Embassy,  
London, England  
April 3, 1959

OFFICIAL - INFORMAL  
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DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE

APR 4/13/59  
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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Dear Bob:

After a while, I am afraid, a reporting officer becomes rather like a psychoanalyst, more and more saying to himself, "Now I wonder what they mean by that?" On the surface the British have made their positions abundantly clear this spring: in conversations with the Embassy; in the rather more revealing conversations they had with you in January, especially over paragraph D of the Berlin Access paper; then the announcements, communiques, and information received on the occasion of the Prime Minister's trips to Moscow, Paris, Bonn, and Washington; in Foreign Office press briefings; and in various other bits and pieces. An interesting detail in all of this, which has piqued my curiosity, is the recurrence of the words "credible" and "bluff". And this goes back to the British Embassy's discussions with you in January about paragraph D, so that I never catch that word "credible" any more, or the idea behind it, without asking myself "I wonder what Bob would think about this?"

In those discussions in January, as you may recall, the British brought over a military expert from London, [Brigadier Mike Carver], who apparently did not have a great deal to do in Washington, but at any rate must have attended one or two of the meetings. [Carver] is a friend of mine, and a highly competent officer, who tends, however, to think a little in

The Honorable Robert Murphy,  
Deputy Under Secretary of State,  
Department of State,  
Washington 25, D. C.

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terms of black or white. About the time that [Carver] returned from Washington, certain of his colleagues who occupy equally high positions in the Ministry of Defence, drafting papers for the consideration of the Joint Chiefs, began to speak in a remarkably similar vein. At that time one began to hear an argument that went something as follows:

"If the West intends to challenge the Russians over Berlin with any recourse to force in order to push through to the city, then the Russians will respond with force, and we must be prepared for war. We don't believe that the Russians really want war, or would actually carry matters to the point of general war, but both for their prestige and in view of their capabilities on the spot, we should expect them to resist force by force unless they saw that we were prepared for a showdown. But for this purpose our military posture must be credible. It would be worse than useless if the Russians perceived that we were merely bluffing, because we reckon that they would call the bluff. For our preparations to be credible, we should at the least have to go on 24-hour alert, call men back to the colors, and perhaps begin necessary measures of civil defence, and we reckon that public opinion would not stand for all that unless we had taken every step to overcome the differences first ~~toward~~ *through* negotiations. Certainly public opinion would not support all this merely to avoid handing a piece of paper to an East German on the way to Berlin."

Brew and I mentioned this at the time, I think, in a letter to Bill Dale. Since then, from time to time this word "credible" has cropped up with people in the Foreign Office with whom we happened to be discussing the German situation: any course of action which the Russians would not consider credible would get us nowhere. In due course, shortly before the Prime Minister's trip to Washington, I think he made a private speech to some group (perhaps the 1922 Committee) in which he stressed the enormity of any serious thought of war; the prospects of the loss of 10 or 20 million of the British population through nuclear bombardment, and the necessity of sending 3 million of the youth of Britain to Canada or other of the Dominions "in order to preserve the life-stream of the nation". I believe you also

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heard something to this effect at the recent meeting with the President.

At a meeting last week of the Military Commentators' Circle (reported in a pot-boiler despatch, No. 2285, April 3), one of the guests was General Sir Geoffrey Bourne, Commandant of the Imperial Defence College. General Bourne made two points by way of comment on the evening's discussion, at one of which I pricked up my ears when I heard that word again. Sir Geoffrey's first point was that effective defence required the best obtainable weapons -- it wouldn't do to try to get by with second bests. His second point was that a defence posture to be effective had to be "credible": any disposition of forces or military preparation which could be discounted as a bluff would be worse than useless.

When I heard these remarks, I thought to myself that this expression, now pronounced by someone so orthodox as a Commandant of the Imperial Defence College, comes up so frequently that it must be an especial favorite in current British military thinking. It seems to have become part of the official language of the Establishment. I wondered whether it could be attributed originally to [Brigadier Carver], who is bright enough to make a point from time to time, and to whom it might have appealed with particular cogency at the time of the paragraph D discussions. At any rate, I thought, on the surface this formula seems highly plausible, since it suggests that anyone who would settle for something less than the "credible" advocates a bluff or something transparently fake. As a matter of logic, however, it struck me that it conceals what might be described as a "perfectionist fallacy": that anything less than completely perfected measures, i.e. those known from the inside as "credible", are not worth doing. The fallacy is this, it seems to me, lies in the discounting of intermediate degrees, and the likelihood of an enemy considering many an intermediate degree as something significant or serious, even though we know from the inside that the measure is not credible in the sense of our being completely prepared for any ultimate eventuality. It seems to lead to the conclusion that one cannot even send an armed jeep up the Helmstedt Autobahn until one has called a couple of hundred thousand men back to the colors and evacuated 3 million children. This obviously absurd conclusion sounds something like what the Prime Minister is talking about. If

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the germ of the idea could be attributed to [Carver]. I thought it was of interest, and in a way what one would expect, from an officer whose career has been made as a disciple of Montgomery, who, I believe, was also somewhat of a perfectionist in military planning.

I note from a report in the Daily Telegraph this morning that we still have this idea very much with us. The Telegraph states that:

"The British representatives (in Washington) have been making the general point that the West should avoid putting itself in a position in which the choice would lie between war and a resounding diplomatic defeat. The worst of all worlds, it has been argued, would result from a Western 'bluff' being called by Russia."

Besides the logic of the matter, it is also of interest how easily the argument can be translated into emotional terms, as you may see from the clippings enclosed from today's press, under the headlines of "MEDDLING AMERICAN GENERALS".

When I ask myself what is behind it all in terms of solid political judgment, especially the Prime Minister's, I come out somewhere as follows:

I believe that no one more than Macmillan, especially after the Suez Fiasco, recognizes that the British Lion is not really King of Beasts any more. A tired lion, an old lion, a respectable lion, on the point of getting metamorphosed into something like the race of "honest shopkeepers" before Palmerston's days. This in fact, in terms of real power, means that Great Britain is no longer a Great Power, except in the sense of moral authority or diplomatic prestige such as Spain, for example, enjoyed as a "Great Power" after the Congress of Vienna. I think that Macmillan has a very shrewd insight into the relationship between Britain's present capabilities and possible actions; he knows pretty accurately just how much the country can attempt and what it cannot. This has been evidenced in many fields: his willingness to cut losses in the colonies, to rid himself of the Cyprus burden, to welcome the new status of a progressively more independent Commonwealth, and to concentrate with might and main on recovering a greater degree of economic and commercial strength.

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It would thus be unjust, in my opinion, to suggest that the British have gone "soft"; rather, I think, they are becoming even more hardheaded in the identification and pursuit of their own interests. Just as these interests are considerably more modest than they used to be, so is their willingness to take action for larger ends, especially altruistic ends, a good deal more circumscribed than it used to be. In defence matters, I think that this is leading them more and more to adopt a porcupine role. They will not threaten anybody, as the Lion used to do, but will see to it that anyone who physically steps on them receives a footful of quills. I am struck by how much the concept of victory seems to have completely disappeared from their military thinking. They think in terms of deterrence and of holding their own within reasonable limits.

In all this I do not exactly see where the British can be reproached with inconsistencies or lack of political logic from their point of view. I think that the concentration on their own interests sometimes slightly blinds them to what can happen elsewhere, as in the case of the Common Market, or what can be expected in Germany. I feel that what is most unacceptable from our point of view is that we should be expected to adopt the same kind of porcupine position, of policies with limited aims, which they are content with and are pretty well forced to be content with. If we subscribe to this, I think we should be surrendering the field to Soviet and Communist dynamism, with perhaps fatal consequences. At the same time, so long as we conduct an Allianzpolitik, we can't escape from a certain amount of adjustment and modification of aims.

If I have drawn out these Friday morning reflections far too long, dear Bob, please pardon me on the grounds that every time I see that word "credible" my thoughts have reverted to you, wondering whether the whole doctrine had not crystallized in connection with your discussions of paragraph D, ~~to~~ which you may have tactfully but firmly perhaps permitted our ally to see that our interests and readiness to take action were less limited than theirs.

With best wishes.

As ever,

Coburn K.